

Daily News/DEBI HAUSSELMANN

Kenny Phillips, a home inspector with HomeSafe Inspection, examines a room with an infrared camera. The camera allows the inspector to see inside the walls and spot damages not visible to the naked eye.

Inspections Superman-style

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It's a bird. It's a plane. No, it's Kenny Phillips, home inspector.

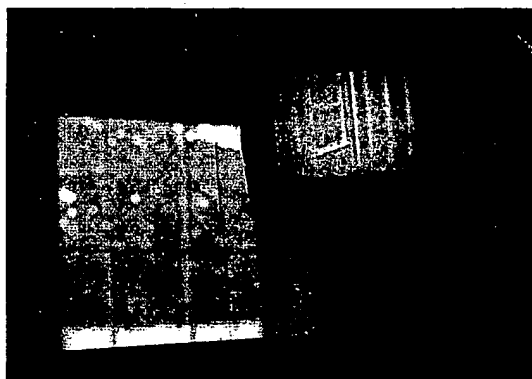
While he may not be faster than a speeding bullet or able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, Phillips is able to see and hear through walls.

"They said Superman had X-ray vision, but what he really had was infrared vision," said Rick Hynum of HomeSafe Inspections. "Our infrared cameras allow us to see through walls just like Superman."

Because of this visual advantage, HomeSafe inspectors such as Phillips are able to find an array of concealed defects that might otherwise go undetected. Common problems that can be uncovered include faulty wiring, moisture intrusion, leaky pipes and inadequate insulation.

Arguably the most notable attribute of an infrared-aided inspection is its ability to uncover termites, whose nests often cannot be located with the naked eye unless a wall is taken down to the studs.

"It tells us where to check with the acoustic probe," said Hynum, pointing out the probe that lets



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Wall studs and a corner window are visible in this infrared image. Infrared imaging can detect structural damage, air leaks, water damage and termites without tearing into the walls.

inspectors hear into the wall. "If there are termites in the wall, you can hear them. They make a very distinct sound; it's almost like knocking."

If the camera produces a round or tubular image it signals a possible water source which in turn may

indicate termites. An acoustic probe is then used to listen for noises produced by the pests.

The termite-talk is then rendered to special sound pattern recognition software used to determine the termite's species.

Hynum cautions the procedure

isn't meant to replace traditional treatment procedures or even pre-purchase termite inspections.

Rather, he says, the detection process works to alert exterminators of their presence and aid in their elimination.

"We are able to detect them before they have done damage," Hynum noted.

Even though the process is proving beneficial for Floridians prone to termites, the inspectors also deliver a traditional comprehensive home inspection that reports on the overall functionality of a home.

"We are not trying to ignore traditional home inspection practices," said Phillips, who heads HomeSafe Inspection's Northwest Florida office. "We just have the ability to look into the wall."

Agent Robbie Fenn of RE/MAX Southern Realty likes the added protection offered by Phillips' sophisticated equipment.

"It takes the liability off of me," she said. "And (knowing of the defects) benefits both the buyer and the seller."

As with a traditional home inspection, Phillips checks the

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plumbing, electrical, mechanical, roofing and exterior components of a home. However, home inspections always begin with a thorough infrared screening.

Because infrared essentially creates a visual image by measuring heat, Hynum said temperature variations may indicate wet spots within a wall. This in turn can alert inspectors to the potential for mold as well as the possibility of termites that transport water to their nesting sites.

"Termites and mold go hand-in-hand," he said.

Water intrusion can cause other headaches as well, particularly with EIFS siding. That's why Destin homebuyer Casey Graham opted for the infrared inspection when he recently contracted a home with the stucco-like siding.

"They let you look through the camera as they're doing the inspection," he said. "You can visually see where the water is

rather than just see a moisture meter go off."

According to HomeSafe, subtle roofing and pipe leaks can be detected with infrared, as can faulty wirings and structural deficiencies.

Rodents such as rats or squirrels that like to nest in walls or roofs are also revealed.

While ordinary gypsum walls allow for the procedures, other types, such as solid concrete, defy infrared's see-through ability.

Phillips said an inspection of an average-sized home lasts about three hours and costs between \$250-\$300. HomeSafe inspectors adhere to the standards and practices of the American Society of Home Inspectors and must pass a national test before completing a week-long infrared training session.

"Ideally you want an inspector with a construction background," said Phillips, who said his years in the industry fits the bill. "But even with all of the experience, you cannot detect the things that this camera can."

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